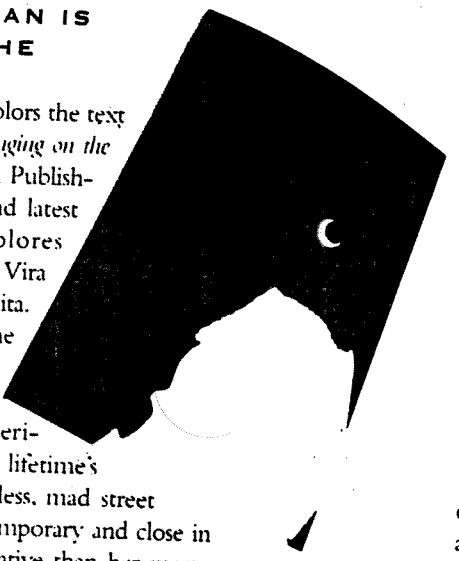
# POEMS OF LOVE AND LOSS

By Anne E. Campisi

Three acclaimed poets—one the Academy's first emerita and two of them alumni—have, in their most recent books, each engaged with some aspect of grief. Dolores Kendrick—now the poet laureate of Washington, D.C., but from 1972 until 1993 a distinguished member of the Academy's English department—immerses the reader in a street woman's richly tragic life in *Why the Woman is Singing on the Corner*. In *The Painted Bed*, Donald Hall '47 progresses through the mourning he began in *Without*, his 1998 collection of poems written following the death of his wife. In *Heroin*, Charlie Smith '65 casts back with a different perspective on a distant but dogged history of addiction and loss. These are sympathetic works all, moving both as stories of our age and for the voices of our peers.

## WHY THE WOMAN IS SINGING ON THE CORNER



A tremendous pathos colors the text of *Why the Woman is Singing on the Corner* (Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2001), the fourth and latest book by poet Dolores Kendrick, the Academy's Vira I. Heinz Professor Emerita. In her "verse narrative," she creates an intricately layered portrait of Phelia, a 48-year-old African-American woman driven by a lifetime's loss to become the faceless, mad street person of the title. Contemporary and close in its perspective, more narrative than her most recent (and justly praised) book *The Women of Plums: Poems in the Voices of Slave Women*, *Singing on the Corner* envelops readers at once into Phelia's life and delirium.

It can be a terrifying ride through her half-ecstatic perspective, spiraling in time through a life that has known a mother's abandonment, the death of a daughter, the loss of three husbands and now a boyfriend. Like Shakespeare's character, this Ophelia is driven mad by the cruelties of love's loss. Violently alone, she tries to invoke more permanent family. From the beginning, for example, she dialogues with the "meddling" ghost of her sister, Garrah. Much later, still alone, she buries some of Garrah's ashes in her garden. Reminiscent of *Hamlet*'s Ophelia, who distributed the flowers of her memories to the court, Kendrick's Phelia "would sit for long hours and eat her garden / in separate flowers, one by one, and she would feel her / madness coming on like a thunderstorm meddling its / way through the smallest bud, or the tenderest root."

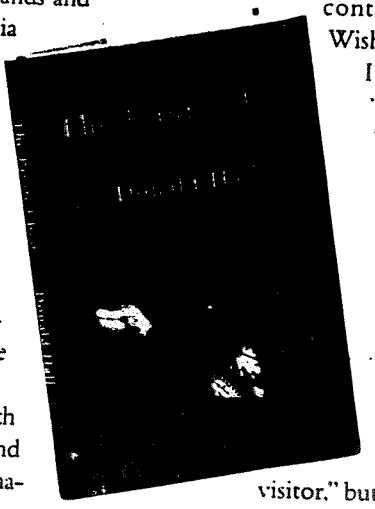
*Singing on the Corner* is populated with Phelia's ghosts, both the bidden and the banished. Phantom dialogue, song and scripture dash through the verse like flocks of birds—all signatures of Kendrick's evocative style. So, too, is Phelia's search for a patron spirit in Jo, a slave ancestor who "Kept the hell of her life in her apron pocket and dared it to burn or touch her flesh." She forgets her boyfriend has left her, personifies the street and trees, bows to the crowds who gather to stare and, ultimately, seeks out the God who will not leave her and is baptized: "So chosen, she is no longer left alone." By the end the reader may feel invoked as well, an intimate witness to Phelia's song and to the kind of life we commonly brush by.

## THE PAINTED BED

*The Painted Bed* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002) is Donald Hall's second book to grapple with the loss of his wife, poet Jane Kenyon, who died of leukemia in 1995. But don't expect another *Without*, his previous collection, which documented that loss almost as it happened, its poems journalistic, epistolary, raw. This new collection, his 14th book of poetry, moves in elegiac floods and drips through a highly structured procession of grief. Even at the lowest points, Hall's poems ring with a deep-seated vitality and fortitude—an ardor, present throughout—that speak to a determination to weather the way from one side of mourning to another.

While Hall never presumes happy endings, or even complete recovery, *The Painted Bed* takes the reader forward and far. Part I's first poem launches with "When she died it was as if his car accelerated / off the pier's end and zoomed upward over death water / for a year without gaining or losing altitude"—an expansive piece anatomizing a future of grief, just as grief sizes him up in turn. This sends us onward, out of the desolation of "Throwing the Things Away" into the luscious tracts of reminiscence on a bountiful life in "Daylilies on the Hill 1975–1989," and finally into Part IV: "Ardor," the collection's buoyant final movement, and sobering coda.

As in much of Hall's previous work, the poems here are chronological, specific and frank; well-crafted to contain the leap and plunge of each consecutive step away from a beloved's death. Unlike the freer flow of *Without*, *The Painted Bed* heavily recruits poetry's formal constraints of meter and rhyme to take control of the emotional course. In "The Wish," he writes,



I keep her weary ghost inside me.
"Oh, let me go," I hear her crying.
"Deep in your dark you want to hide me
And so perpetuate my dying.
I can't undo
The grief that you
Weep by the stone where I am lying.
*Oh, let me go.*"

With such gentle self-consciousness, *The Painted Bed* invites the reader into what might otherwise be too personal to join. In "Kill the Day," Hall writes of a "loneliness that could not endure a visitor," but his use of the third person here and in